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AUTHOR Rose, Jane Atteridge
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ABSTRACT

A collection of eight short stories first published in 1886 in "Atlantic Monthly" under the title "Poverty Grass" is worth recovering, particularly now in light of renewed critical interest in history, culture, and feminism. Written by a 19th century activist and documentarian of social reform named Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman, these regional stories of New England factory and village life are striking for their depiction of truth in fiction. Most notable today, perhaps, is Wyman's commitment to individuals marginalized by 19th century American experience: the immigrant, the uneducated, the impoverished, the handicapped, and the female. One of these stories of persons struggling against odds is "The Child of the State" in which Wyman accuses the criminal justice system of inhumanity as well as inefficacy, particularly in its treatment of female youth. The short story illustrates Wyman's masterful use of formulaic plot and documentary style, stripped of ornamentation, as she relates the history of her lower class protagonist, Josie Welch. (KEH)

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Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman: Writing for Reform

By Jane Atteridge Rose

Some days are just better than others. I had one of those great days about this time last year when I happened upon mention of Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman. I discovered her while I was reading several of William Dean Howells' "Editor's Study" essays, his ongoing effort to educate the literary taste of his Harper's Magazine readers.

In his February, 1887, essay, Howells introduces his readers to a new writer of "absolute and unswerving realism." The author is Lillie Chace Wyman, the book that he is reviewing is her first, Poverty Grass (1886). This book, which has never been re-published, is a collection of eight stories which first appeared in Atlantic Monthly.

What struck Howells about these regional stories of New England factory and village life was Wyman's commitment to the truth in fiction. What strikes us most today, perhaps, is her commitment to individuals marginalized by nineteenth-century American experience: the immigrant, the uneducated, the impoverished, the handicapped, the female.

In her preface to Poverty Grass, Wyman herself describes these stories as "studies of people of different races who have been more or less subject to hard conditions as they have successively occupied, if they have not possessed, that portion of New England with which I am most familiar." Poverty Grass,

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she explains, refers to "that grass which," like her subjects, "gains nourishment from the sands wherein other plants perish" (v-vi).

One of these stories of persons struggling against odds is "The Child of the State." Howells points to this particular piece as having "a kind of monumental strength and quiet . . . arraigining creed and law for their helplessness or hurtfulness with unsparing insistence" (483). In this story, Wyman accuses the criminal justice system of inhumanity as well as inefficacy, particularly in its treatment of female youth. I want to relate this one story to you, to illustrate the way Wyman treated her subject matter and to give you the flavor of her writing.

In a documentary style, stripped of ornamentation, she relates the history of her protagonist, Josie Welch. The story begins with Josie, six, and her brother Tommy, eight, existing, like many children today, as "latch-key kids" of a single mother, who works in a factory. Their life is hard: "At night, Mrs. Welch came home, gave the children their supper, swept, cleaned, washed dishes and clothes . . . and then lay down for a few hours of heavy sleep" (116). Then as now, their situation might seem melodramatic if it were not the reality of so many.

Josie is a little wild; she runs away a lot. The point that Wyman emphasizes, however, is that the way society responds to her personality is evidence of class inequity. "In a happier home," she tells us, Josie's "peculiarities would perhaps have been carefully studied, and all this fine, nervous force might

have been trained and utilized." Sadly, however, Josie belongs "to a stratum of society far below those in which exists the practice of such study and consideration" (116).

When their mother dies, an uncle takes the children in. Tommy, who is old enough to go into the factory with just a little lying about his age, adapts well to his new home. However, Josie, who is expected to care for her aunt's four younger children, does not. She has no domestic inclinations, nor does she demonstrate any of the dutiful desires "to grow older, take her place in the factory, and do her part towards the support of herself and of her uncle's numerous progeny" (119).

Wyman here and throughout the story emphasizes that much of what angers other people about Josie is that she will not take her place in society as a member of the serving class, and that her free, proud personality is only acceptable among the educated leisure class. "In the lower strata of this civilization," Wyman points out, a natural "Bohemian," like Josie, suffers; "the pressure of circumstances is so great that it bears down heavily on all such instincts, and frequently crushes and distorts them till they become impulses towards crime and outrage" (118).

Wyman also criticizes inhumane labor laws, particularly in Puritan New England, where the work ethic and profit motive are sanctified. These cultural attitudes, she maintains, condone oppressive working conditions and contribute to decadence in the working class. Again focusing on inequity, she shows that bourgeois values function differently for workers:

Men and women who labor eleven hours a day in the stifling air of a great factory have limitations to their freedom of will. Those men must eat and sleep away most of their leisure hours. Those women must often toil on in the home after the mill work is done. They cannot spend time and money to go out in search of healthful recreation.

Their "jaded nerves" must grasp at whatever "sensual enjoyment" is close at hand (118).

In a short time, Josie's unsatisfied, wayward spirit lands her in reform school; at the age of ten, she has become a "child of the state." This state agency, and actually a particular institution in Rhode Island, is the primary focus of exposé in her story. Here, society's tendency to validate inhumane treatment of the "lower" class and the "lesser" sex is intensified. Wyman's allegations are most clearly leveled by Mrs. Keyes, a concerned citizen who strongly resembles the author, as she scolds the superintendent:

You take the children who are the worst born and bred in the world, and put them under circumstances which would render desperate, and consequently depraved, the best natures you could find. Your system is a failure, and you know it is (127).

The tragic failure of that system to fill its function--to reform--is as much a part of this story as Josie's tragic life. Here, too, the institution's failure to reform young girls can be

measured by the way treatment of females differs from that given males. There are many little inequities: the boys have a playground, the girls play among the clotheslines of the laundry yard where they work; the boys attend mandatory chapel where they hear sermons by and about self-made men, the girls attend the same sermons, and they sit behind a screen in the back balcony so they will not distract the boys. Far more significant, however, among the injustices done to females is, as Mrs. Keyes explains and Josie's experience painfully demonstrates, that, while the boys are taught a useful trade that allows them to learn self-respect, the girls are given not only "a dismal present" but "despair for the future" (129).

The girls are taught only one trade: domestic service. To take girls like Josie, whose oppressed pride and unrecognized intelligence have led to anti-social behavior in the first place and then to attempt to reform them by forcing them into menial service is an unconscionable crime of ignorance according to Wyman. Furthermore, this strategy only prepares them for defeat. As Josie finds out, "it is difficult for them to obtain places in families." Though "the girls are only qualified to do housework," being "admitted to households where there are children" is much more difficult for reform-school girls than finding factory jobs would be (122).

Josie is placed "on trial"--a sort of parole--in three different families. One situation terminates because the return of an older sister makes Josie's help unnecessary; another turns

out to be temporary also; the third becomes complicated by a love triangle with a village boy and the daughter of the house. The most significant aspect of this rather formulaic love interest, however, is that the young man's primary appeal is that he is the first person who has ever appreciated Josie. "Charley Manton's rude gaze," we are told, "charmed while it abashed her" (133). He is crude and unworthy, but he is the first person in Josie's life who pays her attention. Her gratitude and the trouble that it incurs goes far in illustrating the destructive effect of low self-esteem.

Charley charms her with attention until her employers return her to the reform school. After having been away, Josie finds institutional life even more unbearable than before. One day, however, Charley appears in the boys' section of the reformatory. Though he is not a minor, family influence has gotten him sentenced there for a petty crime, instead of jail. Charley and Josie communicate by clandestine notes until they are discovered. Charley's influence gets him an early release at this time; Josie, who has no friends with influence, is punished for her waywardness with the proverbial cutting of her hair. Her shorn hair, however, gives her the idea for escape. After stealing male clothing from the laundry in order to dress as a man, she breaks out one night.

Here Wyman makes masterful use of this formulaic plot. Male clothing is not just a disguise; trousers make the physically difficult escape possible. When she reunites with the free-and-

easy Charley, Josie declares proudly, "I want to go somewhere and get work, where they can't find me." But he quickly admonishes her, "How can you get work till you've got a dress? It's no use for you to try to get a place as a boy. You couldn't deceive anybody twenty-four hours" (153). Implicit in Charley's pragmatic response is the old double bind: be a female with no freedom and no dignity or be nothing.

When Wyman has Charley casually proposition Josie, "Come with me, an I'll fix it," she again turns the formula to her own theme. Charley has reaffirmed the social order by providing Josie with a female role, the "kept woman." To her bold query, "Will you marry me?" he responds simply, "may be so." To this, Josie, "heave[s] a long, shivering sigh, and follow[s] him" (155).

The story concludes seven years later. Josie, now a woman in her mid-twenties whose "hopeless eyes" shed no tears, is back in prison, probably not for the last time. With no husband but with "one or two children," she survives by a number of shady activities. Sometimes, however, the will to survive leaves her. While drunk recently, she has attempted suicide by throwing herself under a train.

The story closes as it opens, with a situation which might seem melodramatic if it were not so common. Just as now, the failure of a penal system is evidenced in recidivism. Josie's fate, Wyman implies, and the fate of all like her, is to remain "a child of the state," unless we radically change our social institutions.

The other stories in the collection, as Howells notes, "are mostly like it: simple, grim, true to misery, toil, pain, vulgarity, savagery, and the tenderness and beauty co-existing with these in the barest, bleakest, commonest lives" (483). Howells predicts that Wyman, whose name at that time was relatively new, having used the pseudonym S.A.L.E.M. in a number of her earlier pieces, is "destined to be less and less unknown if she keeps on writing." Unfortunately, Wyman did not continue to write fiction, and, predictably, her name has not achieved the wide recognition Howells anticipated. This one collection, however, contains several other pieces that are as well written and interesting as "Child of the State."

Instead of pursuing fiction, Wyman became an activist and documentarian of social reform. With her husband, John Crawford Wyman, a Garrisonian abolitionist, Wyman devoted her life to liberal causes. In the early 1880's they spent several years in southern Georgia, setting up schools and free libraries for former slaves. By the early 1900's Lillie Wyman's interest was focused on suffrage, prohibition, and socialism. Also at this time, turning her attention to the Russian revolution, she helped found the American Friends of Russian Freedom. Although critical realism first served Wyman's goals as a reformer, she turned to writing historical documentaries of the abolitionist and suffrage movements and contemporary exposés of factory conditions.

Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman is not even listed in American Women Writers or Notable American Women. To my knowledge there

has been no literary recognition of her in the twentieth century other than brief, deprecatory mention in Fred Lewis Pattee's Development of the American Short Story. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, however, did mention Wyman as an "author and philanthropist" in their great nineteenth-century feminist resource, A Woman of the Century.

Although Wyman's literary output was small, it is worth recovering, particularly now in light of our renewed critical interest in history, culture, and feminism. I am currently trying to have Wyman's Poverty Grass stories reprinted. William Dean Howells told his readers in 1887 that Wyman's Poverty Grass had much to say to "real men and women" who wanted to read about "real men and women in literature" (483). I believe that Wyman's realistic stories of disenfranchised, powerless men and women in nineteenth-century America still have much to say to us now, a century later.